

# Media and Politics:

## *Discourses, Cultures, and Practices*

Edited by

Bettina Mottura, Letizia Osti  
and Giorgia Riboni

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## CHAPTER TWO

### “TU N’AS PAS DE PLACE POUR UN PETIT SOMALIE?”

### LANGUAGE, PROXIMITY AND IMPACT IN THE GLOBALIZED POLITICAL MEDIASCAPE

GEERT JACOBS<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

On many occasions I have argued that there is no point in analysing any type of institutional discourse if we are not seriously trying to find out about the complexity of life inside those institutions. Referring to the specific discourses, cultures and practices that this volume is focused on, this means that in the end there is no way to really get through to what is happening on the exciting borderline between politics and media if we do not move into the “dark hearts” of TV newsrooms and newspapers as well as the press offices of political parties and wide-ranging decision-making bodies, but also—and perhaps even more importantly—if we are not in touch with the constantly changing interactions between these worlds, some structural and systematic, many more fleeting or accidental. Drawing on Goffman, it could be argued that as researchers interested in unravelling discourse dynamics we need to go backstage.

For the past dozen years, I have been exploring the elusive discursive practices underlying business news and public relations. One recent venture, initiated by Astrid Vandendaele, has been to zoom in on the role of the so-called copy editors, those forgotten stepchildren of the newsroom

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who make often vital, always last-minute changes to what is published in the newspapers (including—crucially—designing the headlines) (Vandendaele and Jacobs 2014). Alternatively, Jana Declercq has investigated how news on health-related issues for elderly people travels from pharmaceutical companies, who may have a new drug to promote, over all sorts of media (both traditional and online), right up until it reaches the patients consuming the news (as well as the drugs) (Declercq and Jacobs 2015). For this latter study we have had to negotiate access to health care multinationals because we believe that analysing press releases implies talking to the people who wrote them and observing them as they are going about their daily corporate communications business.

Interestingly, with some of the theoretical foundations of this more radically context-sensitive approach to institutional discourses now getting clearly laid out (see for example NT&T 2011, Cotter 2010, Perrin 2013 for what has been termed the linguistics of news production) it may be noted that more and more scholars are starting to go the extra mile to negotiate access to institutions of all sorts. When I was reviewing submissions for a recent conference on media discourse, I was excited to read about fieldwork with a Brazilian community of journalists and in Chinese newsrooms as well as about an analysis of a press conference in which FIFA President Sepp Blatter defended his decision to hold the Qatar World Cup in November 2022.

In the present article, then, I propose to reflect on a single feature that in my view has characterized a lot of the newly emerging backstage, production-oriented work, viz. a distinct tendency to focus on the unexpected or the deviant, on those behind-the-scenes practices that come to shed surprising new light on the products that we have been analysing. What I mean is that, in reporting on our various fieldwork activities, we tend to prioritize those processes that we couldn't have imagined existing if we hadn't bothered to try and get through to the professionals involved in them. In terms of methodology, I am pointing to the possibility of a kind of cherry picking which may well be leading to foregrounding and perhaps even overstating the agency of the individual taking specific in-situ decisions.

Here is an example. In a recent unpublished paper (Jacobs 2014) I investigated a short Dutch-language intervention in parliament by the then Belgian prime minister (and later president of Europe) Herman Van Rompuy, one which was – quite exceptionally – subtitled (and not, like all the other foreign language footage, dubbed) on the TV news of one of Belgium's French-language broadcasting corporations. Based on fieldwork that I had conducted at the time of the events, I was able to



reveal the skilful and highly professional way in which the journalist who covered the story exploited the intricacies of inter-language audio-visual translation to deal with a number of higher-order editorial concerns as well as coping with my intrusive presence as a researcher (trying to be the fly on the wall, monitoring his each and every move). Zooming in on the journalist as a pivotal player, I concluded the paper with an optimistic message: in contrast with negative stories about the news media machinery just churning out stories, copy-pasting press releases (Davies 2009) I was championing the supreme impact of the individual journalist consciously and conscientiously determining what we get to read in the papers or—in this case—see on TV. Crucially, the question I would like to raise in this article is a follow-up to this optimistic conclusion: I set out to explore if backstage research, in this case newsroom ethnography, does not perhaps automatically mean that we run the risk of highlighting agency over structure.

The data that I'll be drawing on in this article are taken from the same fieldwork as in the unpublished paper referred to above. Our analytical focus is on the interactional dynamics of editorial meetings, a focus that may well be leading our attention away from the agency of the individual journalist to the impersonal machinery of newsmaking principles and news values.

In the next few sections, before turning to our findings, I will describe the data and method that this article is based on as well as presenting a bird's eye view of recent developments in the literature on news values.

## 2. Data and Method

This article reports on team fieldwork conducted in the television newsroom of one of Belgium's French-language broadcasting corporations.

In line with recent trends in media linguistics (NT&T 2011) and with the developments sketched in the introduction, our approach is a linguistic ethnographic one, which proposes a fine-grained analysis of the backstage discursive processes underlying the production of the news. Instead of restricting our analytical scope to a minute scrutiny of the news (in this case the news bulletins as they were broadcast), we believe it is useful and indeed necessary to go behind the scenes and investigate the active work done by the journalists who made the news, as well as the dynamics of the institutional setting in which this happened (cf. also Flynn *et al.* 2010). Drawing on Rampton *et al.* (2004, 4) in their seminal and much-quoted UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum position paper, we can argue that what distinguishes our efforts from more traditional work in media discourse

analysis is that they help “open up” the scope of research, “inviting reflexive sensitivity to the processes involved in the production of linguistic claims and to the potential importance of what gets left out, encouraging a willingness to accept (and run with) the fact that beyond the reach of standardised falsification procedures, [e]xperience has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas” (Willis and Trondman 2000, cited in Rampton *et al.* 2004, 4). What sets them apart from a strong and long-standing tradition of ethnographic work in news sociology and journalism studies is that they tie the research down, “pushing ethnography towards the analysis of clearly delimitable processes, increasing the amount of reported data that is open to falsification, looking to impregnate local description with analytical frameworks drawn from outside” (Rampton *et al.* 2004, 4).

For the research reported in this paper our linguistic ethnographic toolbox included wide-ranging fieldwork efforts (observation, participation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, fieldnotes, textual data, etc.) through which “the researcher learns to interpret and follow the rules that govern the practices of the field and to understand (and make explicit) its structures of meaning” (Oberhuber and Krzyzanowski 2008, 182). In particular, we assembled the following data:

- transcripts of audio-recordings of storyboard meetings;
- extensive fieldnotes based on close observation of the journalists’ on-line writing and rewriting processes as well as of their interactions with cutters (who are responsible for the technical editing of sound and pictures);
- transcripts of semi-structured retrospective interviews with the journalists and with the chief editor;
- hard copies of the text and video information subsidies that were available to the journalists;
- video-recordings of the final TV news reports.

### 3. News Values

It is well known that Galtung & Ruge (1965) distilled the original set of news values by studying the coverage by Norwegian newspapers of a number of international crises. Essentially, they viewed news values as a series of factors that determine which “events” become “news”; so their news values are “selection criteria” and they include timeliness, proximity, prominence, conflict and impact. Golding and Elliot (1979) were among the first to argue that, because of this product-based

methodology, the news values that emerged from this and other classic studies tended to endow journalistic judgements with legitimacy retrospectively. Later, Bell (1991) set out to go beyond the news product and expand the list of news values by turning to journalistic routines: instead of looking exclusively at the kind of events reported on and the kind of actors implied in these events, he was also concerned with news-gathering and news-processing practices. Hence, Bell came up with new, journalist-centred news values like desire for a scoop, preference for prescheduled events and interest in prefabrication through press releases and agency copy. More recently, the call for a production-oriented perspective on news values has been growing even louder, for example with Allern's (2002) notion of commercial news values, indicating that the more resources it costs to follow up a story or expose an event or issue, the less likely it is to become a news story.

Crucially, this renewed interest in news values from a production perspective entailed not only a longer list of news values, but also a broader definition of them. Cotter (2010) insists that news values are not only about which events become news; "they provide criteria for the selection of elements from the beginning to end of the reporting and editing process" (76). It could be argued that this updated definition of news values has served to shift the analytical focus to individual agency as news values are used to determine what or who gets covered, as well as how to cover it; they come into play at every stage of the news production process, not just at the conceptualization stage (where they are used to answer questions about what to cover) but also at the story construction stage (where news values provide decision-making parameters regarding whom to interview, what questions to ask and what detail to include) and at the story position stage (where news values help answer questions such as: how prominently to play the story, should there be artwork, how long to make the story, where to place the story and how big to place it in terms of physical space) (Cotter 2010, 73).

Most recently, Caple & Bednarek (2015) have followed up on this development by identifying three complementary perspectives on news values:

- news values as existing in the actual events and people who are reported on in the news (a material perspective);
- news values as existing in the minds of journalists (a cognitive perspective);
- news values as constructed in the discourses involved in the production of news (a discursive perspective).

As for the discursive perspective, Els Tobbyack and I have suggested that in addition to classic criteria like impact and proximity, the language of sound bites can be seen as a news value too, meaning that, at least for the TV news, footage in a foreign language is less popular than footage in the station's mother tongue and also that when sound bites in foreign language footage were integrated after all, the individual journalists that we observed treated them very differently (Jacobs and Tobbyack 2013).

The research question defined above can now be reformulated in terms of news values: if we go backstage and prioritize news production processes rather than news products, wouldn't this imply that the cognitive and discursive perspectives get foregrounded at the expense of what Caple and Bednarek (2015) call the material perspective (just as for scholars who do not go into the newsroom and who do an old-school analysis of news values based on a corpus of products, we have been arguing that they are cut off from the cognitive and discursive perspectives)?

Take this excerpt from the abstract of an article by Johnstone and Mando (2015) that was recently published in *Discourse & Communication* with the title "Proximity and journalistic practice in environmental discourse: 'Experiencing job blackmail' in the news":

The shift from coal to natural gas to fuel electricity generation has positive (environmental) and negative (economic) consequences for people in the affected areas of the US. Representations of the situation in the media shape how citizens understand and respond to it. We explore the role of proximity in media discourse about the closing of a coal-fired power plant near Waynesburg, a small city in a Pennsylvania coal-mining region. Comparing reporting in smaller-circulation newspapers closer to the site with reporting in larger-circulation regional newspapers, we find that Waynesburg-area papers simply describe the events leading to the closure while regional papers analyse the events in larger contexts, and that politicians, not the plant owners, are represented as blaming environmentalists for job loss. Our findings point to the importance of proximity in environmental discourse (...).

Since Johnstone & Mando, like most scholars engaged in media discourse analysis, didn't talk to a single journalist and clearly ignored the cognitive and discursive perspectives, the question can be raised whether their research sheds any light at all on news values. My preliminary answer based on the fieldwork I have conducted is that it does. In what follows I will present a slice of backstage research that seems to indicate that at least some of the news values that have long been hypothesized in traditional product-based news analysis are very much present in the

newsroom too. Or to return to the question of individual agency raised earlier in this paper: zooming in on storyboard meetings (where editors and journalists discuss on a daily basis what should be covered in the news and what should not) we'll be confronted with an overwhelming number of data where the individual journalist is not making a difference, where the media machinery is just too heavy and we end up confirming the traditional news values that we could have established on the basis of a classical product-based analysis. All this is not to say that we needn't have bothered going backstage, of course (a lot of ethnographic inquiries into the newsroom have led to unique new insights) but just that there is not necessarily a conflict with traditional product-based analysis and that the two can be complementary.

#### 4. Findings

1. We're in the TV newsroom of one of Belgium's French-language broadcasting corporations. It's a Monday, my very first day in the newsroom less than two weeks before national, regional and EU elections. I am being given an early-morning tour around the premises by the director of media operations, who has granted me access to the site. At one point he summarizes the editor's leading role as follows: "Le boulot consiste à jeter. Un ennemi de plus tous les jours" [The job is to cut. One more enemy every day.]

2. It's half past two in the afternoon on the same day. I'm sitting in on the storyboard meeting for the evening's 7 o'clock news. We're about 14 and a half minutes into a 26-minute meeting. After having covered local political news, the topic shifts to foreign news. Apparently, it's already been decided outside the meeting that they will have one item about a controversial nuclear test in North Korea and another about a scientology trial in Paris.

FDC:

Ça fait deux sujets inters. Tu n'as pas de place pour un petit Somalie? Parce qu'en fait ce sont des des jihadistes étrangers. C'est c'est c'est c'est le futur Afghanistan. En fait, ils viennent complètement infiltrer la la Somalie. Il y a eu 200 morts en deux semaines. Les combats continuent. (INCOMPREHENSIBLE) Sinon, il y a autre chose qui n'est pas mal.

[That makes two foreign news items. You don't have space for a little Somalia? Because in fact it's jihadi warriors. It's it's it's it's the future Afghanistan. In fact, they have completely infiltrated Somalia. 200 have been killed in two weeks. The battle continues. (INCOMPREHENSIBLE) Otherwise there's something else that isn't bad.]

E: Oui.

[Yes.]

FDC: C'est Karadžić.

[It's Karadžić.]

(FDC= foreign desk chief; E= editor)

Anyone who has never been in a newsroom must be surprised to see the foreign desk chief trying to advertise an item about Somalia, first on the grounds that it's just a small story (one that will not take too much time and leave plenty of space for other items) and second by arguing that it's a big thing happening out there: Somalia is "the new Afghanistan," the country's been "completely infiltrated" by jihadi warriors (not just half or two-thirds), and—very importantly—the battle is not over, it's continuing. She's also got some strong figures to back up her claim: 200 dead people in just 2 weeks, a lot more than the earthquake that would take place in Honduras 4 days later and that caused no victims (needless to say the foreign desk chief didn't even consider pitching this far-away disaster in spite of some spectacular footage). Note that the jihadi warriors are called foreigners, which seems to indicate it's not just a Somali story, it's more international and, therefore, perhaps more newsworthy.

I've left out the next couple of seconds, which are more or less incomprehensible, but clearly the others are not convinced and so the foreign desk chief comes up with something else that is "not bad at all." The editor responds with a hopeful 'Yes' and the foreign desk chief reveals that it's a story about the former Bosnian *Serb* politician Radovan Karadžić. Her intonation is persuasive and desperate at the same time, somewhat like a salesperson trying to sell a vacuum cleaner on the phone after you've made it very clear that you don't need a new dishwasher.

Clearly, in economic terms, this is not a seller's market: in the next few seconds it's decided that the coverage of the Somalia story will be limited to a brief voice-over while Radovan Karadžić will not even make the cut.

Interestingly, 4 minutes later, the lineup is discussed, i.e. the precise order in which the different items will be covered:

- A: On irait d'abord, d'abord au procès scientology avant le  
[We'd first go, first go to the scientology trial before]
- E: Avant la Corée?  
[Before Korea?]
- A: Avant la Corée. Ton avis?  
[Before Korea. What do you think?]
- E: Ou proximité ou impact.  
[Proximity or impact]
- A: Oui.  
[Yes.]
- E: C'est la question. (1) Moi, je préfère la proximité à l'impacte mais (1). La France est plus proche.  
[That's the question. (1) I prefer proximity to impact but (1). France is closer.]
- FDC: Mais oui, mets la scientology  
[You're right, take scientology]
- E: La France est plus proche que  
[France is closer than]

(A= anchor)

It's interesting to see how the editor resorts to traditional news value terminology to motivate his own choice, almost as if he was aware of my presence as a researcher supervising the proceedings. If I had been hoping to see some journalistic hocus pocus, the kind of individual agency you could never get through to on the basis of a product analysis, surely I would have been disappointed: what I got to see here was plain, straightforward news value logic as if some algorithm was deciding what to cover and what not, and in what order.

At the very end of the meeting, the editor is still struggling to find some extra space and so the foreign desk chief volunteers to shorten the story about North Korea:

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| FDC: | Moi je ne te fais pas trop long la Corée.<br><br>[I'll make you a Korea story that isn't too long.]  |
| E:   | Non, bonne idée tiens, pas trop long la Corée.<br><br>[No, good idea, not too long the Korea story.] |
| A:   | C'est pas une bonne période pour<br><br>[It's not a good time of the year for]                       |
| FDC: | En inter on souffre.<br><br>[The foreign news desk is suffering.]                                    |

The anchor, somewhat compassionately, concludes that the election period implies that foreign news has a hard time making the cut. To which the foreign desk chief replies that her department is suffering.

In the next few days the nuclear test in North Korea is still in the news. "On feuilletonne un peu" ([It's a never-ending story]), says the editor at one point, indicating how easily people get bored with foreign news. And the foreign desk chief continues to try and advertise her stories, generally unsuccessfully. In one of the meetings she even points to the overhead TV screens showing footage of a terrorist attack in Lahore, Pakistan, and she says "ces images sont quand-même impressionnantes" ([the footage is impressive, isn't it]), indicating how important the availability of images is in deciding what to cover or what not to cover in the TV news.



3. I'd like to turn to another storyboard meeting now, which was ten days later on a Friday, just two days before the elections. At this point in time, the foreign desk chief is getting really nervous about the fact that she still has a number of reports that were made by some of her staff in various European capitals about the upcoming EU elections there and that haven't been broadcast yet. With two days to go before the elections, she realizes that there's little time left. So she's trying to push her stories, in particular one report on Greece and the other on Finland.

- FDC: Il y a, il reste encore, je m'excuse.  
[There is, we still have, I'm sorry.]
- E: Je t'en prie.  
[Go ahead.]
- FDC: Deux sujets Europe.  
[Two stories about Europe.]
- E: Mais oui.  
[You're right.]
- FDC: Parce que on n'a rien passé, tu sais, on a envoyé des gens.  
[Because we haven't shown anything, you know, we have sent people there.]
- E: En Finlande.  
[To Finland.]
- FDC: Et en Grèce. On a un sujet sur la génération 700 euros en Grèce qui doit passer aussi  
[And to Greece. We have a story about the 700-euro generation in Greece that we also need to show.]
- A: C'est que l'Europe avec la les Pays-Bas et avec le la Grande-Bretagne on donne.

[But we have shown Europe with the Netherlands and with Great Britain.]

FDC:

Oui.

[Yes.]

It's interesting to note that the story about Greece had already been finalized on Tuesday so it's been sitting there for a number of days waiting to be included. But clearly there's not a lot of momentum to include it this time.

Two minutes later, there's another attempt to push some foreign news, this time not from the foreign desk chief but from one of the other journalists.

J:

On ne reviendrait pas sur la couverture des élections européennes, s'il y a de bons trucs?

[Couldn't we have another look at the coverage of the European elections, if we have good stories?

FDC:

Ecoute c'est un peu emmerdant. Parce que ni la Grèce ni la Finlande rien ne passe quoi. Il faudrait quand même.

[Listen, it's a bit frustrating. Neither Greece nor Finland, nothing is shown. We should.]

E:

Mais là, la Finlande et l'euro, oui mais ce qu'il y a.

[But, Finland and the Euro, yes but.]

J:

Il faudra un jour y réfléchir – à chaque election c'est la même chose. On envoie des gens aux quatre coins de l'Europe et après c'est il y a pas de la place, il y a pas de la place, il y a pas de la place et donc selon moi a quoi ça sert?

[One day we'll have to think about it – it's the same story with every election. We send people all over Europe and afterwards we don't have space, we don't have space,

we don't have space and so, in my view, what's the point?)

E: C'est pas faux, c'est pas faux mais on ne peut pas non plus pour passer les rubriques passer sous silence une hot news.

[It's not wrong, it's not wrong but on the other hand we can't keep quiet about hot news to cover stories.]

(...)

E: je veux bien je veux bien mais il faut être conscient du fait que la politique, et l'Europe en fin de journal c'est du c'est ardu quoi. Mais je suis prêt, j'aime bien, je suis européen, j'ai fait l'Europe pendant cinq ans, j'adore ça, mais.

[I'd love to, I'd love to but we need to be aware of the fact that politics and Europe at the end of the news broadcast, that's tough. But I'm willing to give it a go, I'd love to, I am a European, I covered Europe for five years, I love it, but.]

And a couple of minutes later:

A: Ce serait quand même bien qu'on puisse euh.

[Wouldn't it be good if we euh.]

E: Bon, prenons la Finlande.

[OK, let's do Finland.]

FDC: Ça veut pas dire que ça ne doit pas être disputé de toute façon.

[That doesn't mean we don't have to discuss it.]

A: Et la Grèce, l'angle c'est quoi?

[And Greece, what is it about?]

FDC:

La jeune génération 700 euros, les jeunes touchés par la crise, les jeunes étudiants qui avaient manifesté. Hellas est allé les retrouver pour voir qui fait quoi, qui vote, qui vote pas.

[The young 700 euro generation, the youth hit by the crisis, the young students who have protested. Hellas has gone to talk to them to see who does what, who votes, who doesn't.]

In the end it is decided that they will include the item about Finland.

FDC:

On garderait la rubrique Grèce pour demain aussi alors?

[So we keep the Greek story for tomorrow too then?]

A:

Oui, on ne peut passer Finlande et Grèce.

[Yes, we can't do Finland and Greece together.]

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In some of my previous work I have tried to show the added value of going behind the scenes: by shedding light on the agency of the individual journalist I have tried to demonstrate how production-oriented research generates radically different insights compared to product-based analysis. I hope that the data presented above have demonstrated again how fascinating it can be to go into the dark hearts of the institutions we're investigating. This time, however, our results serve to confirm what previous product-based work had already shown, including the Johnstone and Mando (2015) paper I referred to above, viz. that traditional, long-established news values like proximity determine what gets covered and that individual journalists hardly manage to make a difference here. Interestingly, the TV station that I investigated had this great idea of covering the EU elections in a number of different European capitals and they sent their journalists out to make reports, but in the end the news

value logic proved too overwhelming. As the editor told me in an interview towards the end of my fieldwork: “Normalement l’éditeur est celui qui tranche parce qu’il est responsable” ([Normally, it’s the editor who decides because he is responsible]). Only to add: “On est responsable de tout mais on maîtrise finalement très peu” ([I’m responsible for everything but in the end I’m in charge of very little]). This sounds like bad news for the general public. In any case, it presents a very different picture compared to the unpublished paper quoted at the outset, where I was impressed with the glorious display of individual agency by the journalist subtitled the Belgian prime minister’s speech.

Talking about his own decision-making role the editor also said:

La décision est d’autant plus facile à prendre que le projet éditorial est clair. Pourquoi on passe tel ou tel sujet, quels sont nos valeurs, quelle est notre ligne éditoriale de manière générale, la longueur des sujets, pourquoi on accorde plus d’attention à un point et pas à un autre? Est-ce qu’on fait des séquences d’une minute parfois de trois minutes? Est-ce qu’on fait des dossiers? Est-ce qu’on traite le sport et de quelle manière? Est-ce qu’on fait des conférences de presse? Que fait-on de l’institutionnel? Que fait-on du politique?

[The decision is easier to take if the editorial project is clearer. Why do we cover a story, what are our values, what is our editorial policy in general, the length of stories, why do we devote more attention to a story? Do we make one- or three-minute stories? Do we produce full reports? Do we cover sport and if so, how? Do we cover press conferences? How do we cover constitutional matters? How do we cover politics?]

This is in line with what another journalist told me: today’s media are more impartial, less ideological.

So where does this leave the production-oriented media linguistic research that has been gathering momentum over the past couple of years? I would suggest that the case study presented here indicates that we should continue negotiating access to all sorts of institutions, including most prominently those situated on the borderline between media and politics if only because, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2014) has said, the production of political news has profound consequences for democracy. From a very different point of view, the French ethnographer Didier Fassin (2013) has argued that we need to go backstage with a double objective: viz. to investigate either the understudied regions of society or those spaces saturated by consensual meanings. I would argue that the newsrooms we’re investigating are both of these: too few scholars have gone into newsrooms, even if most of us seem to assume that we know only too well

what exactly is happening there. Fassin concludes that for the former settings ethnography can help illuminate the unknown while for the latter ethnography is all about interrogating the obvious. I hope to have shown that going behind the scenes of today's globalized political mediascape to investigate news values like proximity and impact is all about exploring this thin line between the unknown and the obvious.

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